

INTRODUCTION

Esther Pujolràs-Noguer & Juan Ignacio Oliva*

Universitat de Lleida/Serra-Hünter Fellow &
Universidad de La Laguna/GIECO-Franklin-UAH/Ratnakara

In this special issue dedicated to “Indian Ocean Imaginaries” ten research articles, three literary texts and an interview showcase the work of authors from this geographical area, many of them prize-winning figures, such as Abdulrazak Gurnah, M.G. Vassanji, Amitav Ghosh and Lindsey Collen, others lesser known but equally powerful writers like Tishani Doshi and Rudramoorthy Cheran. In all cases, the contributors have sought to locate these writers in the wider Indian Ocean space –what we are calling its imaginaries– rather than confining them behind a narrow political frontier. The titles of many of the articles indicate the importance of fluidity in the work of Indian Ocean writers. The first chapter of this volume, “Indian Ocean Imaginaries. The Academic Trajectory of the Ratnakara Research Group,” charts the academic trajectory of the Ratnakara Research Group. Felicity Hand and Esther Pujolràs-Noguer, Ratnakara’s two founding members, outline the diverse research outcomes generated by the group’s active and fruitful engagement with the study of the literary and cultural productions of the Indian Ocean area. In her article “Negotiating Identity and Belonging in the Western Indian Ocean: Fluid Enabling Spaces in M.G. Vassanji’s *Uhuru Street*” Dolors Ortega analyzes this short story cycle with its recurring characters who embody the social frictions that the colonial situation gave rise to. She provides a detailed background to the settlement of an Indian community in East Africa and shows how they often failed to integrate with the African population in a society clearly divided along racial lines. Ortega highlights the collective experience that permeates Vassanji’s stories, which, she argues, can be read as a positive understanding of East African identities. Maurice O’Connor discusses the work of South African Indian playwright and novelist Ronnie Govender in his article “Exploring the Challenges of Ethnic Fluidity Within the Writings of Ronnie Govender.” He examines how Asian, Coloured and Black communities were all victims of white exceptionalism during the apartheid regime. O’Connor suggests that Govender propagates the ideal of inter-ethnic conviviality in his writing, and what resonates strongly in this study is Govender’s insistence on his Africanness even though friction inadvertently occurs.

Felicity Hand looks at the latest novel by the Mauritian writer Lindsey Collen in her article “The Fight for Land, Water and Dignity in Lindsey Collen’s *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours*”. She argues that Collen’s work needs to be read as an Indian Ocean story that has a global transnational postcolonial discourse in its disregard for national or maritime boundaries in its bid for a universal post-

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ethnic, classless and gender-free humanity. The novel relates the rebellion sparked by the murders of four ordinary people whose only crime was to demand the right of access to land and water thus claiming a voice for so many dispossessed people in the developing world.

Esther Pujolràs-Noguer, Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Emma Domínguez-Rué explore the interstices of aging and narrative agency in two emblematic Indian Ocean novels, M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*. Pujolràs-Noguer et al argue that although the power of narration has been amply investigated in analyses of these novels (Hand, 2010; Samuelson, 2013; Helff, 2015; Pujolràs-Noguer, 2018), no article has –as yet– examined these texts within the framework of narrative gerontology. Thus, “Exploring the Interstices of Aging and Narrative Agency in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*” fills up this void and brings to the fore the contradictions of (re) telling our life stories in old age by presenting biographical accounts as a way of weaving a tapestry that is never finished. However, as Pius Fernandes in *The Book of Secrets* and Saleh Omar in *By the Sea* from their aging perspective demonstrate, narrative closure would preclude narrative action (Baars, 1997) and so, imbued with the spirit of Scheherazade's *One Thousand Nights*, itself an Indian Ocean literary reference, their telling must be safeguarded at all costs –their tapestry must remain unfinished, so to speak– since there resides their capacity for making meaning and ultimately survive.

The 1972 expulsion of Asians from Uganda by the President of the time General Idi Amin Dada is one of the most traumatic events that Uganda has suffered which still reverberates in the imagination of the diverse Asian communities of East Africa. Through an analysis of Jagjit Singh's “Portrait of an Asian as an East African” (1971), Danson Kahyana examines the complexities and ambivalences of identity construction. In the close reading Kahyana performs in his article, “Singing against Anti-Asian sentiment in the East African Postcolony. Singh's ‘Portrait of an Asian As an East African,’” he explores the poetic devices that the poet deploys to express the pain of uprootedness and consequent state of statelessness and refugeehood he suffered in view of his relationship with his homeland –Uganda– and his place of descent –India.

Jorge Diego's “‘Stories that go on and on’: Transformative Resilience against Gender Violence in Tishani Doshi's *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods*” offers a pungent examination of how violence is exerted upon the bodies of Indian women. This he achieves through his analysis of Tishani Doshi's poetry collection, *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods*, published in 2017 and which stands as a powerful record of the brutality inflicted against women and the gender prejudices imposed on victims

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of sex assaults in India. Doshi's poetry, as Diego demonstrates, also showcases the media and political interests used to detail crimes of gender violence as well as it portrays that, unlike the common discourse, there is a heterogeneity of bodies in the country. By placing this collection of Indian poetry within a larger feminist planetary dimension focused on transformative resilience, Diego finally illustrates how physical and psychological bodies survive, defy, transmute and, after Doshi's fashion, come out of the woods together.

The next article embarks on an often forgotten aspect of Indian Ocean literatures, namely their worldwide reception by means of translation. In an attempt to acknowledge the contribution of Translation Studies to literary research, Juan Zarandona's article, "Achmat Dangor (1948-2020) and M.G. Vassanji (1950-): The Reception of Two Afrindian Voices in Spain," exhibits the difficulties ingrained in the translation process of two authors with a particularly complex cultural and linguistic background. Hence, as Zarandona argues, translators of Dangor and Vassanji must choose between two translation methods: exoticising or domesticating. As the name indicates, exoticising implies leaving the translated text as close to the original as possible and, therefore, must face the possible rejection of target readers who find it difficult to understand the cultural markers of the text. On the contrary, the other translation method domesticates the original text and thus makes it easily accessible to target readers but it runs the risk of erasing its distinctive cultural flavour. Zarandona's article is a practical exercise whereby the translations of Dangor and Vassanji into Spanish and Catalan are dissected to determine whether their respective translators exoticise or domesticate the original texts.

A special issue on "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" could not be complete without an article devoted to Amitav Ghosh and eco-criticism. Through the lens of Neyrat's "ecology of separation" (Neyrat, 2018), Maria-Sabina Draga's "An Unconstructable Indian Ocean: Amitav Ghosh's Ecological Imaginary in *Sea of Poppies* and *The Great Derangement*" offers an insightful exploration of Ghosh's essay-book, *The Great Derangement* in conjunction with the first volume of his Indian Ocean trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*. In the light of the current coronavirus crisis, Ghosh's own version of what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin call a "green postcolonialism" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2007) –a technology-proof version of an emancipatory move of the margin against an oppressive, polluting centre– shares a deep concern with the ways in which the relationship between nature and culture, which has changed dramatically in the recent decades, mirrors a changing in the relationship between the "West" and the "East" and an increased fluidity in world hierarchies, as suggested by the triad "Land-River-Sea" proposed by the three parts of *Sea of Poppies*. If colonialism took European superiority over non-European civilizations for granted, it is now alternative, non-European forms of knowledge, Draga suggests, that prevail over western knowledge when it comes to facing nature's revolt against various kinds of prolonged human aggression.

The last article of "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" is a deliberate intent on the part of Esther Pujolràs-Noguer and Felicity Hand, to make visible one of the most recent and ruthless cases of colonialism: the Chagos Islands. "The Myth of the Empty Territory: The Tragedy of the Chagos Islanders" stems from a desire, as postcolonial scholars, to legitimize academically the Chagos Islanders' history of displacement and



hence position it as a crucial instantiation of contemporary colonialism. The first section of the article –The Chagos Islanders. Victims of a Ruthless Kidnapping– outlines the colonial history of dispossession of the Chagos Islanders whereas the second section –Writing Myth and Memory to Fight Cultural Injustice Against Chagossians– presents and discusses a performance against oblivion, namely the creative writing workshop that the authors, together with Dr Farhad Khojraty from the University of Mauritius, organized as a means to publicize the tragedy of the displaced islanders.

Last but not least, we believe that the Creation section of this issue contributes successfully to complete our primordial task, that is to say, the delineation of an imaginary cartography of the Indian Ocean. It opens with a moving note devoted to the aforementioned and recently passed away academic and friend Farhad Khojraty, tracing a personal sketch of shared moments in Mauritius and accompanied by some poems written in his honour by his life companion Bilall Jawdy. Following, we are delighted to publish a memoir by the Mauritian writer Lindsey Collen entitled “The Indian Ocean as a Unifying Force: A Memoir” which enhances the borderless ethos of the Indian Ocean territory while also underlining those disrupting forces that impose unnatural frontiers on its waters. Another asset of this volume is the poem “To My Grandmother. The Old Tea Factory at Kearsney, Natal” written by South African academic and poet Betty Govinden, which stands as a stark testimony against forgetfulness. Finally, a talk with the Sri-Lankan poet Rudramoorthy Cheran is included in the Interview section, written by Isabel Alonso, also a *Ratnakara* member.¹ It constitutes the perfect closure for this issue on “Indian Ocean Imaginaries.” Cheran’s poetic sensibility is beautifully exposed in an interview that poses the Tamil language at the core of the Indian Ocean imaginary. The transnational prescience of the Indian Ocean is transparent in this at once ancient and contemporary language spoken by over 77 million people. As a Sri-Lankan leaving in Canada, Cheran’s interview is the testimony of a displacement but, most importantly, it is an invaluable performance of resilience and generosity before adversity.

As editors, we do not want this issue on *Indian Ocean Imaginaries* to be apprehended as a complete, enclosed, finished product. Closure goes against the Indian Ocean spirit that we have absorbed and accommodated to our experiences, both on an academic and individual level. That does not mean that we are not satisfied with the outcome, as a matter of fact, we are extremely happy to have been able to add a new gem to the “repository of jewels” collected by the *Ratnakara* research group. Consequently, we want to finish by paying tribute to the arduous labour and indefatigable spirit of the Chair of the *Ratnakara* group, Dr Felicity Hand. During the last decades she has been the motor of the Spanish academic research on the Indian Ocean literatures and cultures, and generously enough she has been backing this issue with her support, invaluable help and altruistic nature. We thank you Felicity and feel honoured to have you always on board.

¹ Not forming part of this monograph, the issue closes with another interview by Núria Mina (University of Lleida) in conversation with Canadian poet Lorna Crozier (U. Victoria).

